

Ten Rules for Writing a Sherlock Holmes Novel

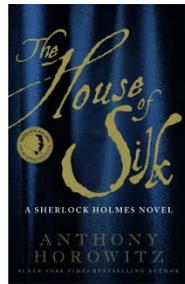
by Anthony Horowitz

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It may well be that Sherlock Holmes is the reason why I have spent so much of my life writing crime fiction of my own and if there is one small boast that I occasionally make, it's that I have probably written more fictional murders than any other writer. Ever. The crime figures can be quickly totted up.

If you were to ask what has made Sherlock Holmes the most successful and best loved detective of all time, I would argue that it is not in fact the crimes or the mysteries.

It seems to me that the appeal of the books has much more to do with character, the friendship of Holmes and Watson, the extraordinary and very rich world they inhabit and the genuine and often under-rated excellence of Conan Doyle's writing, a touch melodramatic at times but still very much in the tradition of gothic romance. When I was asked to write *The House of Silk*, I realized that this would be the key. I had to become invisible. I had to find that extraordinary, authentic voice.



So, I set out the ten rules which I would have beside me as I wrote *The House of Silk* – and here they are. If you've read the book, you can judge for yourself how well they were kept and, indeed, if they were worth keeping.

1. No over-the-top action. I've already touched on this – but after writing nine Alex Rider novels, this was the most difficult, the most exasperating piece of self-restraint. It's difficult to think of a modern thriller without gun-fights and car chases. We all know that Holmes is an expert singlestick player, boxer and swordsman and occasionally carries a firearm. But the original stories have a cerebral, even sedentary feel to them. My image of Holmes is in his study, in front of the fire – not escaping from circular saws or diving six storeys into the River Thames. All that I can leave to Robert Downey Junior. *The House of Silk* has disguises. There are expeditions to Bluegate Fields, to Vauxhall and to the slums of Boston . . . but I hope I have managed to avoid the genre-crossing extremes which, though enjoyable, might best be described as Indiana Holmes. I

have to admit, though, that I was quite pleased to be able to sneak in the brief coach chase at the end.

2. No women. Of course it was tempting to create a romantic lead, to give Holmes a love interest. But re-reading the short stories before I began work, I came almost immediately upon that famous sentence – 'To Sherlock Holmes she is always the woman' – and knew at once that it would have been madness to try and create another Irene Adler. I did briefly think of bringing Irene back (I believe she appears in the second Holmes movie) but I felt somehow it would have been taking a liberty and anyway Watson had already set the seal on that subject: 'All emotions and that one (love) particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind.'

3. This is very much related to rule number two. **There would be no gay references either overt or implied in the relationship between Holmes and Watson.** This was hinted at in Billy Wilder's film, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* which has a scene with Watson tangled up with dancers from the Bolshoi ballet. But it is of course silly and wrong – although I did have an advantage, being a modern writer, in that I was able to examine some aspects of the sexual mores of Victorian England in a way that Doyle could not.

4. No walk-on appearances by famous people. The American writer, Nicholas Meyer put Holmes together with Freud in his 1974 novel, *The Seven Percent Solution*. Billy Wilder had Queen Victoria. I've heard that one Doyle pastiche even has Holmes meeting Hitler! But for me the power of the books is that they largely create a world of their own with very little reference to contemporary affairs. Holmes quotes Goethe, Flaubert, Petrarch, Poe and Winwood Reade but even his most august clients – The King of Scandinavia or Wilhelm Gottsreich Sigismond von Ormstein, the Grand Duke of Cassel-Felstein tend to be fictitious. This seemed to me to be a good rule so I followed it too.

5. No drugs – at least, none to be taken by Sherlock Holmes. Although Holmes now has a reputation for being something of a cocaine fiend, it's only in *The Sign of Four* that we meet him when he is actually taking the drug. I was very nervous of doing any post-modern take on Holmes and it struck me that to have him ravaged by

cocaine would only detract from the story-telling. I knew that drugs would play a part in the story – I wanted to describe an opium den because Holmes had never actually visited one – but drug addiction was out.

6. Do the research. Try to get the details right. It's unlikely that the Doyle estate knew this – or cared – but all my life I have read and enjoyed nineteenth century literature: Dickens, George Gissing, Anthony Trollope, George Meredith and so on. This made writing the book and finding my voice a lot easier. I also received a great deal of help from other sources – you'll find them in the acknowledgements page. That said, I'm sure there are plenty of mistakes too . . . and will argue (when the time comes) that this is entirely in the spirit of Doyle who was himself occasionally slapdash. Watson's wound, for example, moves from his arm to his leg. And most famously, in *The Speckled Band*, snakes cannot climb ropes!

7. Use the right language. It's quite difficult to pastiche nineteenth century English in a way that won't put off twenty-first century readers, particularly younger ones. I have to say that I plucked quite a few words out of the original stories

to act as guideposts, to give the text a sense of authenticity. My favourites are: 'snibbed', 'foeman', 'sickish' (used by Lestrade) and 'passementerie'. That said, the book is actually being written in around 1916 and I would imagine that by this time Watson's own language and writing style would have become more modern.



8. Not too many murders. Again, this is a point that I've already made but it was a very important discipline to set out at the start. And actually, when I count up the bodies, it does rather look as if I've failed.



9. Include all the best-known characters – but try and do so in a way that will surprise. Mrs Hudson is there, of course, as well as Lestrade, Mycroft and Wiggins. In each case, I added very little to what was known about them simply because it seemed to be taking liberties. I have, however, given Lestrade a Christian name . . . Doyle only ever provided an initial. And of course, I had to have Moriarty in the book . . . that was obvious from the start. Even so, I shied away from making him the main villain. It's odd that a character who is only mentioned in about three of the Sherlock Holmes stories and who only appears in one should have had such a huge impact on crime fiction. Perhaps it has something to do with his name? I loved including him in Chapter 14 and although I have no plans to write a second Sherlock Holmes novel, I have a suspicion that the two of us will meet again . . .

10. Rule number ten was the most important rule of all and as I am writing this in August, before the publication of *The House of Silk*, I don't yet know if my publisher will have twisted my arm and made me break it (the rule, not my arm). It was this. **When publicizing the book, never, ever be seen wearing a deerstalker hat or smoking a pipe. I actually asked my agent to put this into the contract.**